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ABSTRACT

In operation since 1990, the Gateway Program is a collaborative welfare reform effort developed by Colorado Mountain College (CMC), the county department of social services, and the local Job Training Partnership Act provider. One component of the program is the Link Program, developed to prepare welfare recipients for enrollment in vocational training at CMC. These potential students are, for the most part, not ready to begin college full time. Many have a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; a history of poor educational performance; low self-esteem; problems with substance abuse; or low math and reading levels. In addition, many have difficulty with child care, attending classes, health or personal problems, and a general lack of preparation for college work. To prepare welfare recipients for college, Link offers a 10-week program of vocational assessment and career exploration, parenting skills, stress management, time management, study skills, a therapist-led support group, conflict resolution, communication skills, and, finally, a unique self-esteem building, risk-taking experience -- rock climbing. The voluntary 1-day climbing outing, during which participants climb a 120 foot near-vertical slab of rock, provides a feeling of overcoming fear and adversity that carries through to college work and life in general. In 1993-94, 73% of the 30 students who went on the climbing expedition enrolled in a vocational education program, with 82% completing their program. Personal narratives by former participants and instructors are included along with program descriptions and a Gateway organizational chart. (MAB)

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CLIMB ON!

From Welfare to a Degree.

PATTI CHRISTENSEN, DIRECTOR OF WO/MEN IN TRANSITION

BRUCE KIME, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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CLIMB ON: From Welfare to a Degree

by
Patti Christensen, Director, Wo/Men In Transition
Bruce Kime, Associate Professor of Outdoor Education
Colorado Mountain College

Desired Outcome: Enrollment in a vocational education curriculum (Certificate or AAS) at Colorado Mountain College.

First Year: (1992-93)

Total Number of Students in Link Program	33
Number of Students Climbing	21
Number of Climbers Enrolling in vocational education program (85%)	18
Number of Non-Climbers Enrolling in vocational education programs (41%)	5

Second Year (1993-94)

Total Number of Students in Link Program	30
Number of Students Climbing	26
Number of Climbers enrolling in vocational education program (73%)	19*
Number of Non-Climbers enrolling in vocational education programs	3

*All of the seven (7) climbers who did not enroll in vocational education went to work full-time after completing the program.

Demographics of Link Participants:

The program is located in Garfield County in rural western Colorado. The area has been hard hit by the decline in mining and agriculture. In addition, the area has undergone numberous "boom and bust" cycles in the oil shale industry. Most of the jobs currently available have to do with the tourist industry. Low wages associated with the service economy are coupled with a high cost of living. The participants are receiving Aid to Families With Dependent Children (welfare) money payments through the Garfield County Department of Social Services and are single parents with children. One-hundred percent of past Link participants have been female. Ninety percent (90%) report some form of abuse; either physical, sexual or emotional. All are considered to be at-risk students under State and Federal definitions. This population suffers from low self-esteem, fear of post-secondary education due to past educational experiences and fifty percent (50%) lack a high school diploma or GED upon entering the program.

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What The Students Say About The Link Experience:

"Before I came into this program, I felt I had never completed anything. Now I'm on the road to my full and happy recovery. Now I can do anything that I put my mind to."

"This program has made me feel good about taking a risk and trying college. I really support The Link."

"It has made me believe in myself even more. Also, I know there are a lot of people like myself in the world."

"It has given me confidence in what I can do. I know I can be better at anything I want. And it encourages my children to achieve and not leave school."

"I feel stronger; like there is nothing I won't at least try."

"It got me back in the flow of life."

"Now I believe I can make something out of my life and a life for my son."

"It helped me to get going again. I had become lazy and it helped me see that you can be a good mom and not be sitting at home. It got me out of a rut."

"I feel more self-sufficient. And being the best I can be at whatever I choose. I now care about myself."

"It gave me 'major' personal insight both as a person with emotions and as a parent and as a person with learning ability."

"I felt needed and valued and cared about by the other women in the group - there was definitely unconditional love and it felt great! The instructors saw us as valuable human beings."

The Link Program
Colorado Mountain College

The Link Program is one of the components of the Gateway Program, the welfare reform program for Garfield County, Colorado.

The Link was developed to prepare program participants to enroll in vocational training at Colorado Mountain College. These potential students are, for the most part, not ready to begin full-time college. They have numerous barriers to self-sufficiency including a history of abuse (either physical, emotional or sexual) a history of poor educational performance, low self esteem, problems with substance abuse and low math and reading levels.

The first students who were placed from the Gateway program into vocational training in 1990 and 1991 had difficulty being successful in school due to an inability to cope with the barriers mentioned above. Students had difficulty with child care, attending classes, health problems, personal problems, substance abuse and a general lack of preparation for college work. The Gateway team analyzed the problems these students were having and developed The Link program to better prepare welfare recipients to enter college.

The curriculum includes: vocational assessment and career exploration, parenting skills, stress management, time management and study skills, a support group led by a therapist, conflict resolution and communications skills and finally, a unique self-esteem, risking experience - rock climbing. This experience has proven to be life-changing for some participants. The feeling of overcoming fear and adversity gained by climbing a 120 foot near-vertical slab of rock has carried through to college work and life in general.

The program is offered for 10 weeks, three times per year and culminates with an inspirational, moving graduation ceremony involving faculty, administrators, family and friends.

Climbing Toward Self-Sufficiency

By Bruce Kime, Associate Professor of Outdoor Studies

Patti Christensen and I had several meetings over a number of months concerning adding a teamwork/self-confidence building activity to the LINK training program. Patti wanted to provide an experience for participants which would be out of the ordinary, placing them in a totally different environment from which they normally operate.

The experience needed to be challenging, yet solvable, with an end result that members would have to work together and trust fellow participants, and gain self-confidence by successfully completing this relatively unusual activity.

Several outdoor experiential activities could provide the experiences we sought, but not in such a short time. The activity which we selected was rock climbing.

Rock climbing causes one to focus on the here-and-now. It requires that one trust someone else (the safety belayed on the other end of the rope). It places individuals in a foreign environment (on a rock face), and mandates problem solving to face the challenge of completing "the climb." Very often a rock climber must face personal fear, whether of climbing or something else.

It should be noted that other organizations use activities such as this one to achieve similar goals, particularly Outward Bound, where related study has been done (Israel, 1989) on their effectiveness.

The climbing outing lasts one day. This is relatively short, and we are exploring two or three days of activity; however, the experience has a profound affect on many of the participants.

It is important to stress that this experience is voluntary. I believe that is paramount to the participants' success.

I first present a brief outline of the experience and its benefits to the participants in their regular classroom, allowing time for questions. I then return to the class at a later date for two hours of rope handling and safety instruction. Most have never seen rock climbing equipment, so I proceed as I would with any beginning rock climbing class at the college. I make it a point to tell this to the group in order that they feel part of a Colorado Mountain College class.

The group then moves to an outdoor rock climbing site a week later for the "outing." I am assisted by Patti and one of her staff, plus a third female. We

like the third assistant to be a Colorado Mountain College student who has taken a number of our rock climbing classes. This adds not only to our teaching and safety but, as importantly, provides a college student as a role model. We spend one half hour demonstrating and practicing climbing technique, then move on to the actual rock climbing. Two staff are at the bottom and two at the top of the climbing site to supervise and give support.

We set up two climbs and one rappel. Upon reaching the top of a climb, the participants then belay the next climbers up. After belaying, they then move to rappel back down to the bottom. Both the climb and rappel require overcoming fear, focusing, and trusting equipment and other individuals. Support from group members on the ground is tremendous, often adding the psychological impetus a climber or rappeler needs to overcome the challenge.

The fear that participants experience in this activity can recall the same fear from a previous abusive situation. This has been recognized by Israel in her study of battered women in a program at Colorado Outward Bound (1989). We feel that these feelings should be explored during private counseling sessions, although we have added the presence of the group's counselor at the climbing site.

At the end of the rock climbing day, we spend a few minutes "debriefing" the activity and suggest further discussion of the experience in the group counseling session. The counseling session is confidential; however, we continually receive positive comments on the experience from participants.

The Gateway Program
Colorado Mountain College

The Gateway Program is a welfare reform program in Garfield County, Colorado. Garfield county is in western, rural Colorado. This program has been in operation since 1990 and involves a collaborative arrangment with Colorado Mountain College, the county department of social services and the local JTPA provider. The program has been recognized as a model program for rural welfare reform in Colorado.

**There is true collaboration - no "turfism." The case managers of all three agencies operate as a team and share resources and information to facilitate intensive case management of program participants.

**There is no "creaming" of participants into the program. All applicants for AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children) in the county are referred into one of four components of the program.

**The services provided to the partipants are comprehensive in that any necessary resource is available due to very strong cooperation among area agencies and local businesses and service clubs. For example, Lions Clubs provide free vision screening and glasses to program participants and local businesses offer job shadowing and internships for program participants.

**Students who begin a fulltime semester in a vocational field succeed. Many are honors students and eight students were inducted into Phi Theta Kappa spring semester. In addition, the program retains 82% of students who begin a fulltime vocational program.

Garfield County Welfare Reform Program - The Gateway

Since 1990, Garfield County Department of Social Service, JTPA and Colorado Mountain College have implemented a unique, collaborative project in compliance with the Family Support Act of 1988.

Program Highlight:

No Creaming! All AFDC recipients in Garfield County are required to participate.

A collaborative, non-duplicated effort. There is no "turfism." All three agencies share personnel, budgets and resources.

Is a "model" program in the state. Utilizes a "team case management" approach which works.

How It Works:

AFDC recipients receive:

- Monthly grant (dependent upon number in family)
- Medicaid
- Child care while in school
- Transportation allowance
- Support services to $800/year per client (car repairs, needed work clothes, emergencies)
- Transitional child care and Medicaid for one year after training (income dependent)

Responsibilities of the client:

- Attend orientation
- Complete Employability Plan
- Monthly attendance reports
- Compliance with all GATEWAY program requirements
- 15 credits (full time) each semester, 9 for summer
- Secure federal financial aid (PELL grants)
- Enter Job Search or On-The-Job Training at the end of training

Program Components Available:

- Community Work Experience Program (CWEP)
- On-The-Job Training (JTPA)
- Job Search
- Up to 24 months of vocational training (CMC)
- GED program (CMC)
- LINK (a 10 week pre-vocational skills program)

Some Helpful Definitions

Family Support Act of 1988 - The Federal law that made welfare reform a mandate.

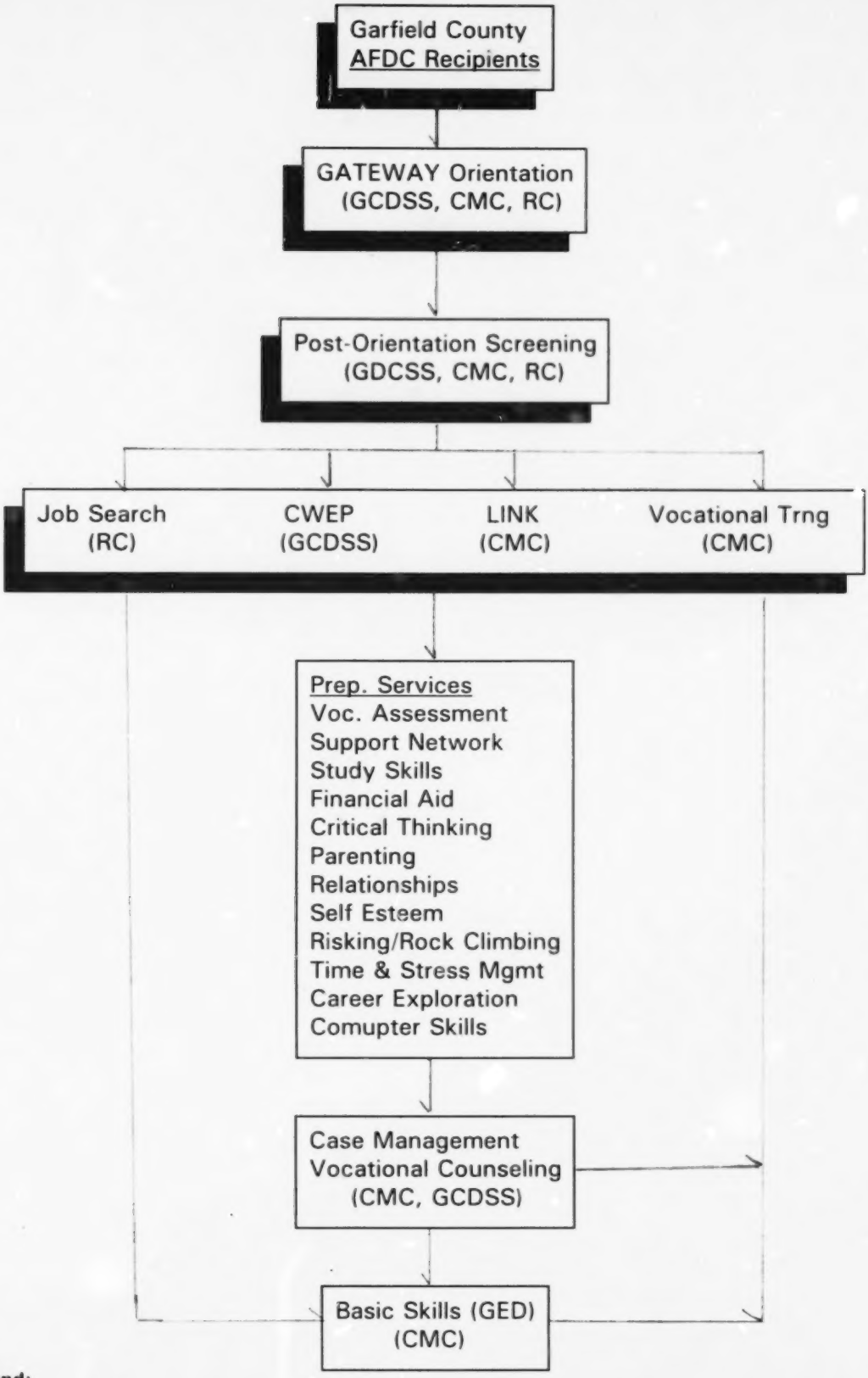
JOBS PROGRAM - The Federal welfare reform program named after the passage of The Family Support Act.

New Directions - The State of Colorado's welfare reform program enacted in response to the Family Support Act.

The GATEWAY - Garfield County's welfare reform program.

The LINK - The pre-vocational program part of the GATEWAY.

Wo/men In Transition - Colorado Mountain College's single parent/welfare program.



Legend:

CMC- Colorado Mountain College
RC - The Resource Center, Inc. (JTPA)
GDCSS - Garfield County Dept. of Social Svcs
CWEP - Colo. Work Experience Program
AFDC - Aid to Families with Dependent Children

Link

We've all come together out of lifes of struggles and of pain;
But through Link we've learned steps that our goals we may attain;
We've learned about our children, about ourselves, and self esteem;
We've also learned how to have fun and work together as a team;

This class has helped prepare us for school, a job and just life;
It helped us by giving us tools to handle our trouble and strife;
We've learned not only by teaching but by experiences we've had;
I've learned to gain insights and to learn from even situations
which are bad:

It has given me ideas for the dreams I have had for years;
Not only by the materials given but by what I've seen in my peers;
Before coming into the link program I knew what I desired to do;
But we received tools, some ideas that may be old but to me they're
new:

Now with the tools that you've given and the knowledge that was
shared;
We can go on to our dreams and for them be more prepared;
I know in the closing of this class it's not the end but a start;
It's the closing of one goal as another begins with this I'll depart

Depart into the future and to new goals ahead;
And learn from them also as I go whichever way life may lead;
I'll head for my dreams until reality they'll be;
Yes, then it will become reality and the results you will see:

Denise Wilkerson

THE MISSING LINK
BY BOBBI McDONNELL - Link 4

I am a thirty-three year old woman who has wanted to return to college for the last fifteen years, but for one reason or another I kept putting it off. I always had a good excuse for not returning, but deep down I was afraid of failure.

When I moved to Colorado from Arizona to start my new life I joined a program called The Link, and the instructors there were great. The motto of the group was, "If you want it badly enough you can achieve it." If you didn't have the self-confidence when you entered the class, you sure did by the end of the nine weeks. Patty and Chris were great motivators.

The most positive part of the class for me was when we went rock climbing although I was scared to death of heights, the group gave me so much support that before I knew it I was on my way to the top.

When I did get stuck, I never looked back; just at what was ahead for me. That was the turning point in my life, because that's when I knew I could go back to school and accomplish my goals; there's been no looking back. I truly believe that the Link program gave me the confidence to succeed and the courage to fail.

I am now at the end of my first semester, and it has not been easy, but it has been worth the effort.

4/29/94
Essay #4
Eng 002

WHAT THE LINK GROUP MEANT TO ME
Denice Flower - Link 6

Eight weeks ago I joined Link 6. Today I graduated. Link six was my inspiration to go on with my life. When I first came I thought/felt everyone else had control over me and what I did. Through the eight weeks of listening to everyone in the group having similar problems gave me the inspiration and courage to stand up for myself. For example Kim being beaten - - I couldn't stand the fact that someone was hurting her. But I justified my own abuse. I guess she helped me see that I'm better than or stronger than that abused little girl inside of me. Patti and Chris helped give me someone to look after to see women can be happy, self-sufficient, energetic and enthusiastic about anything they choose. I found I am my own person and I should have my own goals. Not take on a man's goal over my own like I have done in the past. Knowing its okay to be on my own and have my own agenda. In short, I have learned to love myself a lot more and to care for my needs, wants and ambitions. And I know from this day forward I will never be beaten, put down or neglected by a man or anybody else. And that is a nice feeling. Thanks Patti and Chris. My success partly belongs to you two.

Link 1

"Climb On"
by
Christy Steerman

There I was, face to face
with the biggest rock I've seen.
From up above I heard "Climb On,"
and felt nervous in my knees.
I grabbed the rock and dug in deep,
and started up the slab.
My feet were slipping, my nails were gripping
and there was a rope I could not grab!!

"I've never semlled the moss so near,"
I heard fall from her lips, then
"Rocks!" I hear from up above,
It's still ringing in my ear!
"You're halfway up" the Rose would say,
but she was not down here!

I've never heard the term "Crack Climber",
but I met one today
It's interesting how much a crack
can mean to a "First and Only" timer.
The fear is such you must scream out,
it's just a slight reminder.
"There's no where else to put my hand,"
I can't find a place for my shoe,"
If I don't find a cubby hole now,
at the bottom I am sure I'll be soon.
"Look out below!" "I can't do this!"
"Just move a little more to your left."
"I can't look up." "I can't look down."
Waht do you mean? Just take a breath.
It's just right there, I see it now.
I am almost at the top.
Another foot or two to go,
And I won't be a flop.

I've never felt this kind of relief,
I am standing on firm ground.
I take a look at what I've done,
and see beauty all around.
Just about the time that I have gotten over this,
Bruce looks at me and says with a smile, "Are you ready to descend?"
There's just no way. I am going down the back.
But before you know, you're on repel, and you never ask for "slack."

"You're doing good. You're halfway down.
Don't let go of the brake."
"Keep leaning out, your feet apart,
you've never felt such an ache.

It's closer now, I'm almost down
   I can't wait to kiss that rock.
It's "Off belay." You're on the ground.
   Your knees can now unlock.
Now someone else is going up, and
  all that you can do
Is stand down there and cheer them on
   And help them see it through.

I've never felt so satisfied
   as I did on this day.
To have done this thing I've never done
   and in such a challenging way.
We thank each other for the courage we gained
   by seeing each other try.
By going beyond our limited strength
   And like eagles we did fly.

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